CHILDREN'S MUSEUM NEWS

THE TOLEDO MUSEUM OF ART
FOUNDED BY EDWARD DRUMMOND LIBBEY

NO. 9 TOLEDO, OHIO DECEMBER, 1935

THE HOLY FAMILY PETER PAUL RUBENS

GIFT OF ARTHUR J. SECOR

THE TOLEDO MUSEUM OF ART

RHYTHM IN THE RUBENS

HAVE you discovered, when walking through the galleries of a museum, that pictures painted with brilliant colors attract your attention before the others? A famous painter of three hundred years ago, Peter Paul Rubens, usually painted with such vivid red, rich greens, and warm yellows that his canvases are easily recognized, once you have learned to know them. In the Toledo Museum of Art is a large painting by Rubens, called The Holy Family, a gift from Mr. Arthur J. Secor. Because it is typical of his art you can learn from it what some of his painting characteristics are.

Rubens is called a Flemish painter because he lived in Flanders, which is now called Belgium. He was born on the twenty-eighth of June—on Saint Peter's and Saint Paul's day, and for that reason his parents named him Peter Paul Rubens.

As he grew up he was given an advantage which few boys received. For a year he was a page in the palace of a countess who lived in the city of Antwerp. There he was taught gracious and courtly manners, and because of this splendid early training he had in later years friends among kings and queens and noble people. When he was about forty years old he was sent as an ambassador to Spain, to France, and to England to arrange treaties for his own country.

After a year at the court of the countess Peter Paul became tired of the quiet, luxurious life and begged his mother to allow him to study painting. He was apprenticed to a painter of Antwerp. The word "apprenticed" means that Rubens was sent to work for the artist, and to learn from him how to paint. This took many years for there was much to know about mixing colors and preparing canvases on which to paint. He learned, too, how to draw and to model figures beautifully.

In each city men who did the same kind of work belonged to a guild. The masters of the guild were the finest workmen, or the master workmen. To them the boys who wished to learn a trade were apprenticed. At last when Rubens was twenty-one he became a master painter of the painters' guild. However, he still had much to learn before he could become the great artist in whom we are interested.

Like many of the artists of northern Europe, Rubens went to Italy to study the works made by the Italians. These artists—most of whom had died a hundred years or more before—were considered among the greatest of all the world. Rubens studied their colors and their drawings, even copying some of the paintings so that he

might learn more exactly how they had made such splendid pictures. Especially he noticed the arrangements of figures and objects, and learned from them how to arrange these in his own paintings so as to make fine designs. When we look more closely at The Holy Family we shall see how he used this knowledge. After eight years in Italy he returned to Antwerp.

In his home Rubens had a large studio where many students and assistants helped him to produce the hundreds of pictures which are said to have been painted by him. Rubens never claimed to have painted a picture entirely by himself if his assistants had helped him. The picture in the Toledo Museum of Art is thought to have been painted entirely by Rubens.

Rubens preferred to paint large pictures. By making the figures life-size, he said he could paint their movements with greater freedom than he could in small pictures.

Many artists of several centuries ago chose to paint the people of their own time in their pictures of Bible stories and myths. In such pictures Rubens used the well-known landscapes of Flanders. It was natural that painters should picture the Bible stories and myths as if they had occurred in the countries with which they

were familiar, and among such people as they knew well, for neither Rubens nor other painters traveled to the Holy Land. In The Holy Family in the Toledo Museum of Art Ruben's wife, Helena, is pictured as the Madonna. It has been said that Rubens here painted himself as Joseph, and an old servant as Saint Anne. No doubt the children were painted from the sketches Rubens made of his own children when they were little.

Certainly Rubens wanted Mary to be the most important figure in the painting. Let us see how he made her so. First, he placed her in the center of the picture. Second, he dressed her in a brilliant red blouse, which is the brightest spot in the painting. Third, he framed her face with dark hair, making a sharp contrast of light and dark such as always attracts our attention. Fourth, he arranged all the other figures in the painting in positions that direct, or lead, us to Mary. Notice the child in the lower right corner. The line of his arm and head—of the sheep's head also—directs our eyes to the back of the next child. From him we move upward to the sleeping Christ Child, lying against Mary's red blouse. Above the head of the Christ a brooch in the form of an angel's head carries our attention on to the face of Mary. In the lower left corner let us begin with the curves of the carved cradle and the folds of the woolly blanket. See if you can move from these to the curves of the little Saint John's legs and arms until you reach Mary's face. Over Joseph's arms and head and along the branches of the apple tree is another series of curves leading directly to the center of interest. Even the angel with the red-violet scarf, flying from the upper corner, carries your attention to Mary.

Rubens loved to paint action. Even in a quiet picture such as The Holy Family there is a feeling of slight movement, as if the wind were blowing and the figures were changing their positions a little. Are you wondering how Rubens did this? Look at the reproduction on which the dark lines have been drawn. These lines show us the rhythms of curves with which Rubens created the movement.

When you see this painting in the Museum you will find that its color is a very important part of its beauty. Rubens is famous for his fine use of a few colors, especially of red. He painted many changes of each color, blending one into another in a masterly way. He painted flesh with pink high-lights and delicate blue shadows, modeling plump bodies, like those of these babies, with great care.

You can often recognize a Rubens painting by its rich colors, by the painting of sturdy figures, and by the moving curves in the design. Look for these characteristics when you come to the Museum to see this painting.